Subject: American Bison medal

See Also: Noe, Sydney Philip

Brooks, Ruth Walker

[Sculptor

50 W 9th St., NYC]

February 4, 1936

RUTH WALKER BROOKS - 50 WEST NINTH STREET - NEW YORK CITY

February 4th, 1936

The American Numismatic Society
Broadway between 155th & 156th Sts.
New York City

Attention of Mr. S. Noe

Dear Mr. Noe:

In answer to your letter of February 3rd, I want you to know that I am more than pleased to have you receive one of my medals commemorating the American Bison.

I feel that it is one of the highest compliments that could be paid to my work, and I only hope that it will be a worthy addition to your wonderful collection of medals.

I would like to make a certain point clear, however, and that is that I am the owner and sponsor of this medal. The American Bison Society, as you referred to

the medal in your letter, has no connection whatsoever with my medal, so that I do not want you to be mislead in your data associated with my medal.

Thank you so much for the interest that you have taken in my work, and I hope that some day soon, I will be able to add another medal to your wonderful collection.

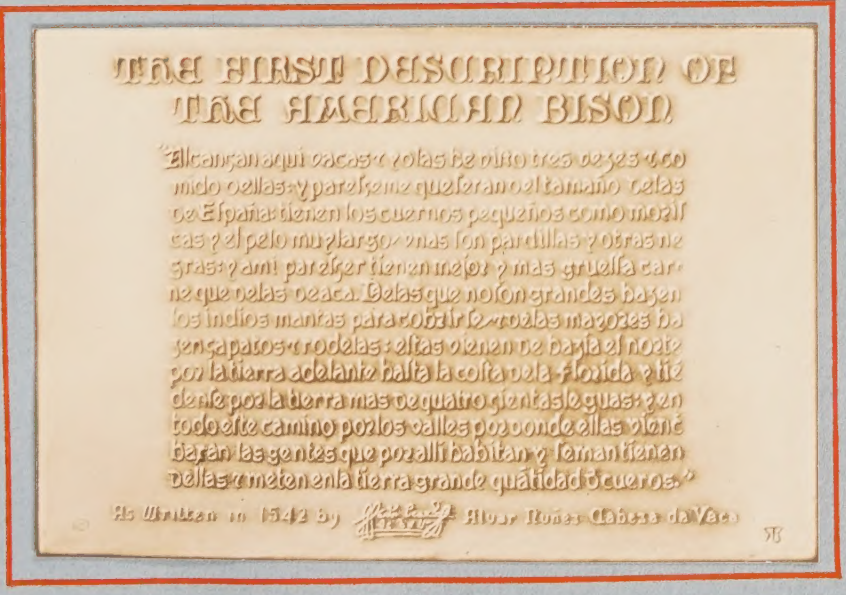
Sincerely yours

RWB:ED

Ruth Walker Brooks

A SKETCH OF
THE LIFE OF CABEZA DE VACA

A medal to Cabeza de Vaca who was the first to describe The American Bison


THE FIRST DESCRIPTION OF
THE AMERICAN BISON
Alcançan aqui vacas: y dellas he visto tres vezes gran
mido dellas: y parescame que eran del tamaño delas
de España tienen los cuernos pequeños como mo
cas y el pelo muy largo: unas son pardillas y otras ne
gras: y ami parescer tienen mejor y mas gruesa car
ne que delas de aca. Delas que no son grandes hazen
los indios mantas para cobrirse: y delas mayores ha
zen sayos: y rodelas: estas vienen de hazia el norte
por la tierra adelante hasta la costa dela Florida: y tie
nense por la tierra mas de quatro cientas leguas: en
todo este camino por los valles por donde ellas vienē
hazen las gentes que por alli habitan: y toman tienen
dellas: y meten en la tierra grande quantidad de cueros."
Ruth Walker Brooks

Actual size in bronze by Ruth Walker Brooks. To be obtained by writing to 50 West 9th Street, New York City

PRICE $20

A Sketch of the Life of Cabeza de Vaca

Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was born in Jerez de la Frontera, in old Spain, not far from the port of Cadiz, where, during his day, went in and out most of the ships coming from the new World. He was born about the year 1490, at the time when Ferdinand and the great Isabella were still trying to conquer Granada, the stronghold of the Moors.

When the Christians were fighting with the Moors in 1212, an ancestor of Cabeza de Vaca's mother showed King Sancho of Navarre a pass through the mountains by which the King took the Moors by surprise from the rear, and thus the battle was won. As the shepherd marked the trail by a cow's skull, the King knighted him and gave him the "Skull" for his Coat of Arms, whence came his name, Cabeza de Vaca. This again became an appropriate name for Alvar Núñez, for it was he who was the first white man to see and describe the American Bison.

His paternal grandfather was Don Pedro de Vera, conqueror of the Grand Canary. Don Pedro was courtier in the Suite of Henry of Navarre, and he used to amuse his grandson with tales of his exploits. These were the days of the great Spanish Conquistadores, when any normal boy would want to make a name for himself through deeds of valor.

At the age of twenty-one he served his King in Italy, but returned in 1513 and became "Camarero" to the Duke of Medina Sidonia in Seville. He served his master in civil war, and also in the war against the French. It was about this time that he married, but there is no record of any children. Yet he tells in his old age how "she sold all she could of jewels and property" to maintain his honor throughout his trial and remained faithful to him through all his exploits and disappointments.

An expedition was organized by Don Pánfilo de Narváez in the year 1525. He was given the "Rights to Discover, Conquer, and People the region from the Rio de las Palmas to the Isle of Florida." This expedition was to be outfitted by himself. Cabeza de Vaca was appointed by the King Charles V., known as Charles the Great, as Treasurer for Spain of this expedition to collect the King's revenue on all gold and silver that they should find.

Narváez had headed an expedition to Old Mexico in the year 1520. Cortez was jealous of any one else coming into Mexico, and so bribed all of Narváez's followers until they left their leader, and then Cortez took Narváez prisoner and held him for three years, and at the end of that time he was released and promised that at all times he would be Cortez's servant. After a year in Cuba he returned to Spain and became a witness in an investigation against Cortez. For this he was rewarded by being allowed to head an expedition to Florida.

Narváez, commanding five caravels and six hundred men, set sail

from Seville June 15, 1527. They landed in Santo Domingo in August in order to get food and horses. There they stayed forty-five days and then set sail for Santiago de Cuba.

Here the main force was left while Cabeza de Vaca (who was about 40) and Captain Pantoja each took a ship and went to Trinidad to get other provisions. While they were on shore a tempest arose and both ships were sunk, with the loss of sixty men and twenty horses. This was the first tragedy of this most disastrous of journeys. Because of the great fright of the men, the Governor decided to go into winter quarters in Cuba, and put Cabeza de Vaca in charge of the fleet. In February they again set sail and arrived on the tenth of April north of Petersburg, just fifteen years after Ponce de León had come looking for the "Fountain of Youth" and had named this land "Florida." They stayed until the first of May, and then started out to find a great bay of which they had heard. There were three hundred men and forty horses that started out by the land route and the rest were to follow by sea. They were never to see the ships again and a good number of them were never to see the Homeland again. For months they treked through the swamps and across land they did not know, in the terrible heat of summer and without proper clothing or food for the cold of winter. They finally reached a bay on the Gulf of Mexico which they named the "Bay of Horses" because they killed all the horses that remained and smoked their meat and made water buckets of the legs. There were but two hundred forty-seven men left by this time, most of the others having been lost through disease and attacks by Indians. Finding no ships to meet them they decided they would build rafts and make their way as best they could to Old Mexico.

After suffering shipwreck and sickness, there remained but four: Cabeza de Vaca, Captain Alonzo del Castillo, Captain Andrés Dorantes, and Estebanico, who is sometimes said to be a Moor, and by others a Negro. These arrived in Mexico City July 23, 1536.

Eight years of this time Cabeza de Vaca was virtually a slave of various Indian tribes. They were as a rule kind to him, but they were very poor tribes who lived mostly on roots. They gave him of what they had, but for months at a time there was not sufficient to eat, and no clothes with which to cover his body from the cold. It was during this time that he first saw the Bison and described the animal as it appears on the reverse of the medal which was engraved from the original report as it is in the Public Library in New York City. It reads as follows:

> *"Here also they come up with cows; I have seen them thrice and have eaten their meat. They appear to me of the size of those in Spain. Their horns are small like those of the Moorish cattle; the hair is very long, like fine wool, and like a pea-jacket; some are brownish and others are black, and, to my taste, they have better and more meat than*

those from there. Of the small hides the Indians make blankets to cover themselves with, and of the taller ones they make shoes and targets; these cows come from the north, across the country further on, to the coast of Florida, and are found all over the land for over four hundred leagues. On this whole stretch, through the valleys by which they come, people who live there descend to subsist upon their flesh. And a great quantity of hides are met with inland."

It was in the year 1532 that he broke away from the Indians, and started his final journey south to Old Mexico. Along the way he met others of the Narváez expedition, who joined with him. They met a tribe of Indians that thought because they were white men that they must be great medicine men. They brought their sick to them in large numbers, and the Spanish would bless them and breathe upon them, recite prayers and then make the sign of the cross, and also often would use some forms of Indian medicine. The Indians claimed that they were completely healed of their sickness and therefore showed the Spanish great kindness and reverence, they also paid them for their services. As their fame spread the Indians escorted them from tribe to tribe where they healed great numbers, and at each move they would try to get nearer and nearer to Mexico.

When Cabeza de Vaca returned to Mexico and saw how badly the Indians were treated and enslaved he then vowed that he would spend the rest of his days championing their cause. He was very anxious to return to Spain and to present his report to the King.

Cabeza de Vaca arrived in Lisbon August 9, 1537. The King was in France, so it was some time before he could tell his tale and relate how badly the viceroys were carrying out the King's orders as stated in the Council of the Indians. Cabeza de Vaca was very anxious to get the Governorship of "Florida" in order to help the Indians with whom he had been, but learned on arriving in Lisbon that Soto had gotten the commission ahead of him. In reward for his hardships and studies, the King made him Governor of "Half the World south of the Equator." The document was dated March 18, 1540. It was a position left vacant by a man who had been a ruthless governor, and most of his following had been left behind, and were still carrying out his policy. October, 1540, Cabeza de Vaca sailed from Seville with a light heart, thinking of the wonderful province that he was to govern, a province that would be known in Spain as the most just to the Indians. The first sign of bad luck came when he was held by storms at Cadiz, until December 6th. Finally he and his men arrived at Santa Catalina, South America, March 29, 1541. They proceeded up the Rio de la Plata to Asunción, his capital. Here he tried at once to enforce the laws of which he had dreamed in his long years of hardships with the Indians of the North. He was met with opposition on all sides, as the Spanish had come to this new land to get rich, they did not relish the idea of paying the Indians for food and to have to give up their slaves.

While Governor of Asunción the natives told him tales of the "Land of Gold." Later he set out with some following to find this Golden country, but soon Cabeza de Vaca's men became discontented, and they had to turn back. This golden land was Peru, and had he been able to lead his band across South America, he would have gotten there only to find that Pizarro had been there before and reduced the natives to serfdom, but Cabeza de Vaca, like so many others, was never to see the "Land of Gold," nor was he to get the credit for crossing another great country, but was to die, and to hear before he died that his rival had succeeded where he failed. It is enough to say that he came back to Asunción a sick man, and a prisoner in his own capital. All the fault lay in that he had treated the Indians too well, and they had loved and trusted him, while the Spanish felt that he had interfered with their rights in regard to the exploiting of the natives. So they put him and his few faithful Spanish followers in prison; the Indians could do little to help their friend. On March 7, 1545 the people of Asunción shipped Cabeza de Vaca back to Spain, in such an unseaworthy vessel that they had hopes it would founder and never reach the homeland. But the ship did arrive at Terceira in the Azores on July 16, 1545. Here Cabeza de Vaca escaped and put himself under the protection of the Portuguese Governor, hence he went to Spain in a Portuguese vessel that arrived in Cadiz about a week after the others who were accusing him. The conspirators had hurried to court before him and made many false accusations against him. He sent out orders on his arrival to have them arrested, but once more ill luck pursued him, as they had gotten ear of the Court first. With no one to befriend him he went on trial for many years. Finally they put Cabeza de Vaca in prison in Madrid, and still the trial went on for five years more. At last he was released, a man of sixty, broken in spirit, sick and without money. In the year 1556 he was granted a pension by the King. This proud man, Cabeza de Vaca, born into a great Spanish family, who had alone crossed one continent, and who had all his life befriended the weak, was now an old man, and dependent on the charity of others for his very bread. It is thought that he died in Seville about the year 1556.

In the year 1542 he had written a full report of his journey across the southern part of North America and down into old Mexico. In 1556 he re-published the "Journal" and had it printed in Valladolid, but it is from the report of 1542 that the paragraph on the medal has been taken. This is the only complete copy known to exist. It is in the New York Public Library. Under the quotation appears his own signature, at the bottom of the medal.

> *It is to this truly great man that I, Ruth Walker Brooks, do dedicate this medal, for his great spirit and his unshaken ideals to which he adhered through misfortune and adversity.*